

# How Unsuccessful EFL Learners Listen to English: An observation

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## 1. Introduction

One of the challenges in teaching English as a foreign language is to teach listening comprehension. This paper aims to report on a longitudinal study on two learners of English as they practiced listening comprehension in the target language over the period of ten months. These learners may best be described as unsuccessful learners because their proficiency in English is far lower than that of the average student of their age. I intend to describe the process of listening comprehension training that they underwent and to derive some pedagogical implications from my observation. Specifically, the paper: (1) reviews the characteristics of EFL listeners, (e.g. ways of listening to chunks or individual words), ways of monitoring their comprehension, and treating phonological information; (2) reports an observation on how the two unsuccessful EFL learners have improved their listening comprehension over the past school year. Think-aloud protocol data were obtained from the two learners during their listening comprehension activities (see O'Malley, Chamot, & Küpper, 1989, for discussion of this method). The results of this research indicate that novice listeners improve their listening comprehension by (1) accumulating chunks in their memory and (2) monitoring what they listened to.

## 2. Background and Research Questions

### 2.1 Metacognition and monitoring

It has been pointed out in the literature on listening comprehension that successful listening is closely linked to the learner's capacity for metacognition, i.e. the operation of the mind which assists cognition by indirect ways, such as monitoring or regulating one's own studying. Macaro (2001) defined cognition as the way the brain holds information for short periods of time, stores information, selects and retrieves information and processes information. Chamot et al. (1999) pointed out that metacognition is the hallmark of the successful learner.

Many researchers have mentioned that metacognitive strategies are a significant factor in a successful and autonomous learner (Chamot, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; O'Malley, Chamot, & Küpper, 1989; O'malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Kupper, 1985; Laurens Vandergrift, 1997, 1998; Larry

Vandergrift, 1999; Wenden, 1999). Wenden (1999) referred to the distinctions between metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies: metacognitive knowledge is referred to as information which learners acquire about their learning, while metacognitive strategies are general skills through which learners manage, directly regulate, and guide their learning. The goal of learning strategy instruction is to assist students in developing awareness of their own metacognition and control of their own learning (Chamot et al., 1999).

One of the conditions that enable a learner to use metacognitive skills is an ability to monitor. Analyzing the process of monitoring, Rubin (1987) says that students will (1) identify a problem, (2) make some sort of decision about the nature and seriousness of the problem, (3) decide whether to correct the problem, and, if they decide to do so, (4) correct the error, and (5) notice any feedback on whether their correction was acceptable, permitting learning to take place.

The significance of monitoring in the process of language learning has been pointed out by many researchers: O'Malley et al. (1989) described monitoring as a key process that distinguishes good learners from poor learners. Oxford (1990) suggested that effective listeners extensively use self-monitoring: they check whether they correctly understand the meaning of whole chunks of message, monitor any confusion they encounter, and correct inaccurate guess.

Vandergrift (1997) put forward the concept of comprehension monitoring as a form of metacognition which is at work in the process of listening comprehension. He defined comprehension monitoring as 'checking, verifying, or correcting one's understanding at the local level'. He also mentioned that a shift in depth of processing might be a significant distinction between novice listeners and intermediate listeners. In his research, novice listeners reported using cognitive strategies, such as translation, transfer, and repetition, while intermediate listeners reported using metacognitive strategies, such as comprehension monitoring and problem identification.

Dörnyei (2005) suggested that metacognitive monitoring concerns processes such as monitoring task difficulty as well as the confidence about one's accuracy of monitoring. In other words, when monitoring is conducted, listeners pay attention to what the speaker is saying and grasp its meaning. The nature of comprehension monitoring being what it is, the way in which it is done by the learner is arguably a reflection of the level of his or her proficiency in the target language: the higher the proficiency, the better the learner monitors his or her comprehension and copes with the problem if there is one.

## **2.2 Grasping words or chunks**

Research has suggested that one of the crucial conditions for effective comprehension is the listener's ability to grasp chunks, as opposed to words, in the material to which he or she is listening. Vandergrift (1997) mentioned that intermediate listeners would be able to process larger chunks of information

and allocate more attentional resources to monitoring because prolonged language exposure has internalized many structures, routines, and words. On the other hand, ineffective listeners use “text heavy” strategy, which means “dependence on the text and consistent use of paraphrase” (Rubin, 1994). O'Malley et al. (1989) collected think-aloud protocol on ESL learners from Spanish-speaking countries who lived in the United States. The participants were divided into two groups: effective listeners and ineffective listeners. From the results, they found that the effective listeners tended to listen for larger chunks, and they shifted their attention to individual words only when there was a breakdown in comprehension. On the other hand, the researchers found out that ineffective listeners might listen to a comprehension task on “a word-by-word basis”. This in turn seems to indicate that the degree to which learners practice chunking is a criterion by which it is possible to ascertain how successfully they can comprehend what they hear.

## 2.3 Research Questions

In this research, we observed, as examples of unsuccessful listeners, two EFL high school students whose proficiency levels in the target language did not reach that of the average 3rd year junior high school students in Japan. After those students took a course in English for one school year, they reached the level of the 3rd year junior high school students at the end of the school year.

I observed the way in which those learners grew from being unsuccessful listeners to being more successful listeners. I collected think-aloud protocols on five different occasions spread over the school year. Specifically, I focused on the following questions:

1. Do EFL students come to grasp listening comprehension materials in terms of chunks rather than words as their listening proficiency develops?
2. Do they monitor their comprehension more as their listening proficiency develops?

In this research, ‘chunks’ shall mean grammatically correct phrases with more than two or more word, and words mean individual words, not phrases. See 3.2 for further discussion of chunks.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

Two female EFL learners in high school, Anna and Yuki (pseudonyms), were chosen for the think-aloud protocols research. They were considered unsuccessful learners in this research because in June, before this research started, they were diagnosed as being at the level of Grade 4 of the STEP (The Society for Testing English Proficiency) test, which corresponds to the English ability of 2nd year

students in junior high school. Their results in the diagnostic tests were the same: they are able to pass Grade 5, and the possibility of their passing Grade 4 is about 60%. It will be safe to assume on the basis of their STEP test results that their listening comprehension is at an extremely low level. At the end of the school year in February, however, both of the students passed the Grade 3 test of the STEP test. We may say that the students became successful learners compared with what they had been 9 months before. Their motivation may be said to be fairly high, judging from the fact that they had attended my class regularly and volunteered to participate in my research.

Their profiles are as follows: Anna is 20 years old, and five years had passed since she entered high school. She likes English songs and often listens to foreign music. She attended junior high school for a full three years. After she entered high school, she did not take English lessons at all for two years, and then, she took Oral Communication 1 when she became a third-year student, and the next year she took English 1, and now she is in English 2 class. Yuki is 19 years old, and four years had passed since she entered high school. She attended junior high school only when she was a first-year student. Japanese junior high school education lasts for three years; thus she missed the second and third years of it. However, Yuki went to an English conversation school from age 8 to age 10 when she was in elementary school.

### 3.2 Procedures

I took think-aloud protocols from both students over the period of one school year in order to assess their development of their respective listening comprehension proficiency over that period.

Studying think-aloud protocols is one of the methods of analyzing learners' mental processing (see Gass & Mackey, 2007, for details). As listening frequently needs immediate process and response (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002), it is difficult to analyze what is going on in mental processing while listening.

O'Malley et al. (1989) pointed out the advantage and disadvantage of the think-aloud protocols: the advantage is that students will access strategies operating short term memory and report on sequences of strategies used to solve a specific problem; the disadvantage is that the protocols will not permit a sampling of all the strategies the students might use in understanding, studying, and recalling new information. The researchers also mentioned that the process of interrupting informants to report on their thoughts may change the nature of the thinking and precipitate strategic processing which otherwise might not occur. In other words, collecting think-aloud protocols could have some effect on learners. Although it could allow researchers to access on line processing and might be a practical method to analyze the way in which students use strategies, Mackey & Gass (2005) suggested that there was a caveat on all research that relies on participants' giving information on their thought process (including a think-

aloud process): one needs to be aware that participants may not be aware of their processes and/or they may not wish to reveal them.

In this study, protocols were taken five times: in June, July, October, November and February. The school year starts in April and ends in March in Japan. Data collection sessions were conducted in Japanese although the students mentioned English words which were (or they thought were) from the text. In each session, their protocols were collected while the students heard a material three times.

Materials used for the protocols were from a listening section (Part 3) in a TOEIC Bridge Official Preparation Guide edited by the Institute for International Business Communication. Text types were a monologue and a dialogue, which were used by turns. The materials used in June were used again, in February, in order to measure the students' performance after the treatment.

Their proficiency levels were assessed by two tests: the aforementioned STEP diagnostic tests, given in April, and the STEP grade 3 test, given in February.

In the EFL classes the students enrolled in, listening activities were introduced in every lesson throughout the school year. The activities were divided into three categories: listening to English songs, activities and exercises for comprehending their textbooks, and explicit listening strategy training. Table 1 shows the listening activities in the classroom throughout the year. As an introduction

**Table 1** *Listening activities in the classroom.*

	Songs	Strategy training	Exercises and activities relevant to a textbook
April	The Galaxy Express 999		(1) Oral introduction by a teacher (2) Reading aloud (3) Read and look up (4) Stop and dictate before pauses (5) Exercises for listening training in the textbook
May			
June	Never Ending Story		
July			
September	A Whole New World		
October			
November	What I've Been Looking for		
December			
January		(1) Make a hypotheses before listening and correct it if necessary (2) Decide the words and phrases you'll listen to (3) Feel the atmosphere (4) Retain English you hear, renounce what you heard in English, (5) Pay attention to strong from; the words with stress are content words (6) Retain English you hear, shadowing without speaking out, (7) Take a note while listening	
February			

to each lesson, students listened to music, especially focusing on phonological sound variation. Some activities for enhancing listening comprehension, such as oral introduction, reading aloud, and read-and-look up activities, were carried out through the school year with a textbook the students used. The students also did the listening exercises in the textbook. In addition, after the winter vacation, some listening strategies were taught explicitly.

The protocols were analyzed by (1) counting the number of chunks and words the students uttered during their 'think-alouds' and (2) counting the number of instances of monitoring. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, a chunk is defined as more than two words combined correctly from the grammatical point of views. If the students uttered long phrases such as a sentence, it would be divided into some units, such as a unit of a subject and a verb, or a unit of an adverbial phrase. If our subjects' English were better, recognizing chunks would be difficult, as there would be many grammatical combinations of words and it would be difficult to ascertain where a chunk, as we call it, begins and where it ends. Actually, in the case of our subjects, such difficulties rarely arise because the subjects' proficiency in English is low and combinations of two or three words are few and far between in the English which they produce as the reproduction of what they hear. For that reason, I consider the above definition of chunks, although it is admittedly vague, is sufficient as a working definition for the purpose of my research.

In this research, monitoring shall include two phases: (1) meta-cognition thinking (to identify the process of the way in which one reaches her understanding, or give a reason why she thinks so); (2) comprehension monitoring (Vandergrift, 1997) (to check, verify, or correct one's understanding at the local level).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Listening to individual words or chunks

The words and chunks that the students produce or attempted to produce did not suggest answers to my research questions. Figure 1 and Figure 2 present fluctuation in the number of words and chunks in the utterance respectively. It is difficult to sketch out the features in the students' performance quantitatively from these results.

Now we will observe the students' protocols. The remarks in Japanese made by the students and the researcher have been translated into English by the latter. In the following excerpts, words and phrases in English in quotation marks are those in the original transcriptions; letters in italics are words and phrases in English pronounced as Japanese words and phrases, i.e. pronounced completely as combinations of syllables from the Japanese sound system.

First, their protocols on the same materials will be compared. From Yuki's protocols, we can see some qualitative improvements from the first session to the last.

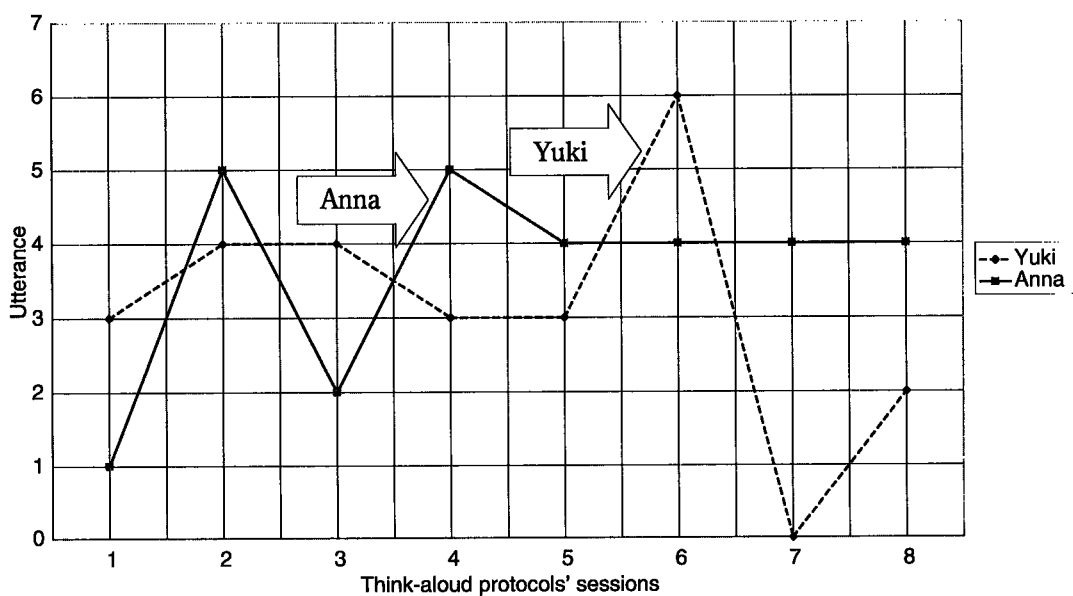


Figure 1 Utterance: Individual words

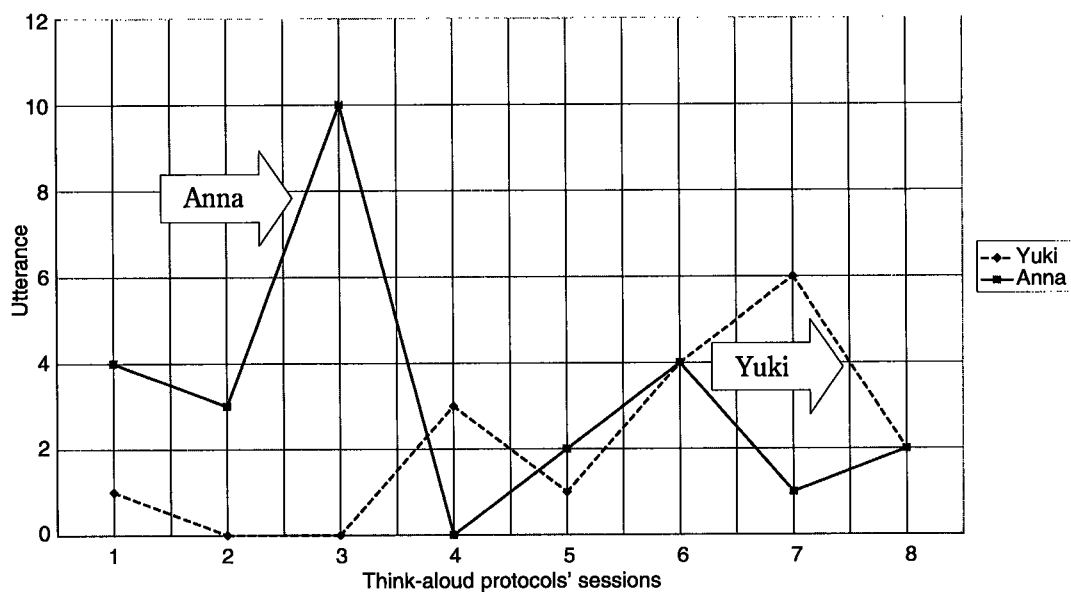


Figure 2 Utterance: Chunks

## Excerpt 1 (Yuki)

(Script)

May I have your attention, please. Flight 100 to Toronto is now ready to board. Passengers should report to gate 31 immediately.

In June

T: What do you think this is about?

Yuki: It may be about an air plane.

T: Why do you think it is about an air plane?

Yuki: Didn't it say "flight" or something?

In this case, she inferred that this text was something about an air plane; however, she did not attain comprehension of the text at all.

In her last protocols, from February, which were on the same script, some improvements can be observed from her first protocols. She seems to have learned some idioms and words, and that seems to make it easy for her to grasp the passage.

## Excerpt 2 (Yuki)

In February

Yuki: "May I attention please", well, (it means) listen to me for a while. I heard "one hundred", but I don't know when it was uttered.

T: Well, what was the story about?

Yuki: In sum, passengers were called to a gate in the airport.

T: How do you know?

Yuki: Well, an air plane has come.

The next excerpt is from Anna's protocols in June. Anna uttered one English word and four chunks in June, and four words and one chunk on the same material in February. It appears that the result is contrary to the previous research, which mentioned that effective listeners seem to be listening for larger chunks, while ineffective listeners seem to gain comprehension on a word-by-word basis (O'Malley, Chamot, & Küpper, 1989; Laurens Vandergrift, 1997); however, we can also see some qualitative changes in Anna's protocols.



## Excerpt 3 (Anna)

(Script)

Man: I'm going to the dry cleaners

Woman: Could you pick up my jacket?

Man: No problem. I'll be back soon.

In June

Anna: "I'll be back soon...."

T: Can you hear the last sentence?

Anna: Yes, something about a 'bag'.

T: What about a bag?

Anna: Well, 'bag' is something, something.

Anna: "I caught jacket?" Does it mean he or she wears a jacket?

T: Jacket? [He or she is ] wearing a jacket?

Anna obviously uttered an English sentence, "I'll be back soon.", and it appeared in the original passage. Nevertheless, she misheard 'back' for 'bag'. Her knowledge of Japanese 'bakku', which may mean 'a bag' or 'back', may very well have triggered her misunderstanding. She misheard another word. She took 'could' for 'caught'.

This suggests that she listened to English word by word rather than in terms of chunks; moreover, she failed to infer the meaning of the passage because she attempted to interpret what she had heard in terms of the words that she happened to know without paying attention to the context.

Next, we will see Anna's protocols from February. The material was the same as that for Excerpt 3. In this session, Anna finally attained comprehension.

## Excerpt 4 (Anna)

In February

Anna: "pick up", we say 'pick up' in Japanese, right?

T: Yes, we say 'pick up' in Japanese, too.

Anna: "jacket", "pick up", "Could you pick up my jacket?"

In February, she was able to reach an understanding of the same passage. Here she comprehended

the chunk “pick up”, and the word “jacket”. That enabled her to derive from what she had heard the sentence, “Could you pick up my jacket?”. In other words, she had more chunks stored in her memory in February than in June; this may show her improvement.

Let me focus on the third session in October. This time both students listened to the same material. Here Yuki uttered four English words and no chunk, and Anna two English words and ten chunks. Both of them reached an understanding of the passage while undergoing their think-aloud process.

(Script)

Man: Excuse me. Could you tell me where I can catch a bus?

Woman: Walk up Fifth Avenue to Main Street, and you’ll see a bus stop on the right.

Man: On the right? Thank you.

Excerpt 5 (Yuki)

Yuki: Well, he asked where a bus stop was, and she said “means street”. She also said something “Avenue”, “means street”, and right side of the something “Avenue”. The man might say, “right side, thank you”.

Excerpt 6 (Anna)

Anna: “Could you tell me”... he asked. “Bus stop”...where the bus stop is, he asked. Is it right?

This script may have been easy for the students because (1) they had learned some idioms for asking directions in the English class and (2) the situation depicted in the material, which is often seen in textbooks, was familiar to them. Thus, Anna uttered 10 chunks, which is the highest number of chunks achieved in this research.

## 4.2 Monitoring

Figure 3 shows that (1) the number of cases of monitoring comprehension increased as time went on during the year; (2) in the 6th session, held in November, the students monitored less than they did before and after sessions. Point (1) suggests that the more the students developed their English proficiency, the more they would be able to monitor their understanding. Point (2) indicates that the students seemed to monitor less when working on scripts about more familiar topics (e.g. topics that appear in their textbooks).

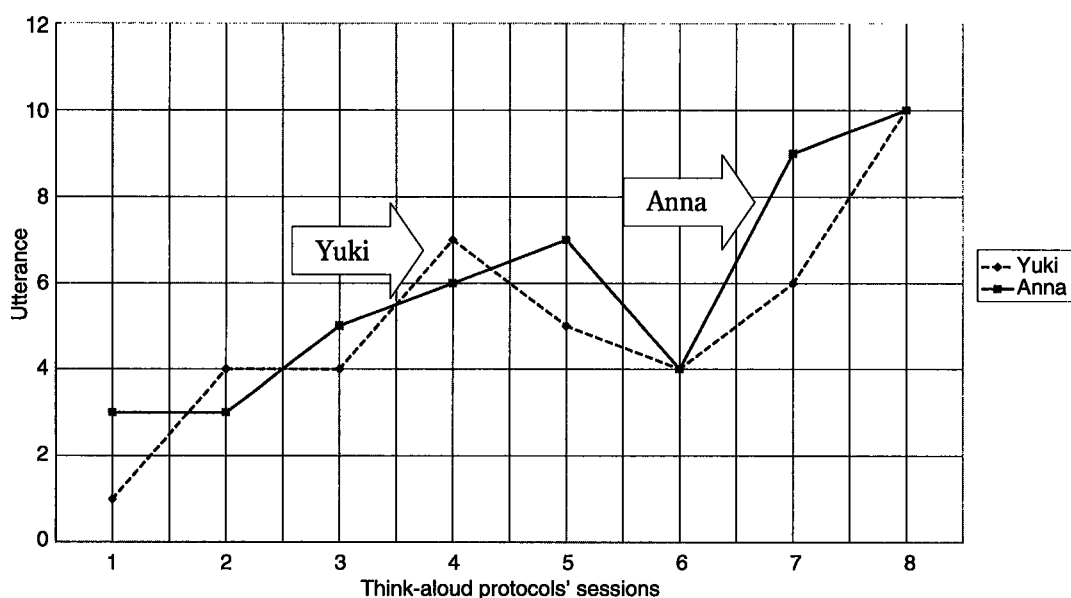


Figure 3 Monitoring

Excerpts 7 and 8 are from Yuki's protocols, from June and February respectively. The same material was used in these sessions. Its script appeared in Excerpt 1. Figure 3 shows that in the first session in June, Yuki did monitoring once; in February, she did so ten times. Underlined parts in the excerpts are considered monitoring by the author.

## Excerpt 7 (Yuki)

In June

Yuki: Well, "flight" ....the word I could exactly understand was only "flight".

T: Didn't you hear any other English?

Yuki: Well, [I heard] "gate", may be...[what I also heard] were numbers, but I don't know what numbers I heard. It was vague.

## Excerpt 8 (Yuki)

In February

Yuki: "immediately, immediately, immediately" (*it was possible to identify the word immediately although it was not correctly pronounced*), I don't know...."May I, May I...". When I hear "May I", I want to say "May I help you." (*laughing*) "May I....", well, I get it! It's...It's "attention please".

In Excerpt 7, the sentence underlined was the only part that can be regarded as her monitoring. On the other hand, in February, she did monitoring ten times, and Excerpt 8 covers one of those ten occasions. Here, we can see that she knew that 'May I help you?' was not the exact sentence that was said in the material. She attempted to recall what she had heard, and then retrieved "attention please" from her memory.

Her performance on this occasion seems to suggest that she has an ability to retain in her memory the English that she has heard and later to retrieve it for language processing, an ability which is essential for L2 understanding (and, for that matter, L2 production, as well).

Next, let me focus on 6th session, in which less monitoring occurred compared with that before and after this session. A hypothesis can be proposed that monitoring does not occur when materials are rather easier for students. Excerpts 9 and 10 will show that both of the students understood the dialogue almost completely.

#### Excerpt 9 (Yuki)

(Script)

Man: My cousin Susan is flying in for a visit. She'll get here on Monday.

Woman: That's great news. How long can she stay?

Man: Just until Saturday.

In November

Yuki: Going on a trip. And she will stay there until Saturday.

T: Yes.

Yuki: "That's great news!"

T: Yes, who will stay there?

Yuki: Well, it was mentioned in the first part, but I forget.

#### Excerpt 10 (Anna)

Anna: A cousin comes. I forget when..., Monday? Well, he said "Monday"...Didn't he say Monday and Saturday, right?

T: Yes.

Anna: And, visit, my cousin, will come, that's great news.

In Excerpt 9, Yuki mentioned the meaning of the dialogue in Japanese. She understood almost perfectly

the story after listening for the first time. In Excerpt 10, although Anna did monitoring and asked for exact information, that is, whether it was Monday or Saturday, Anna also understood, after the first listening, who will come, and what the cousin will do, and that was great news to the couple. From these protocols, we can see that this material was easier to them, and as a result, it can be said that monitoring was not necessary for the students to understand the material. On the contrary, the last protocols include the highest number of cases of monitoring: ten times for both students. It means that the material was difficult for them, and monitoring was necessary for them to attain comprehension.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, monitoring has been considered to be a key process that distinguishes good learners from poor learners (O'Malley et al., 1989). From this point of view, the two students were better learners in February than they had been in June. The improvement in general English proficiency that they achieved during the period in between, as attested to by their success in the Grade 3 STEP test, may be attributed in part to their improvement in listening.

## 5. Conclusion

In this longitudinal research, observation was made on the way in which ineffective listeners became more effective listeners. One of the EFL teachers' obligations is to produce effective listeners, and the outcome of this research has suggested some clues to how such efforts can be made.

I had two research questions, one regarding the comprehension of chunks and the other regarding comprehension monitoring. The answer to the former question was not clearly found. The number of words and chunks in the utterance did not present any features on quantitative analysis, while the qualitative analysis suggested that some of the words and idioms they had learned facilitate their understanding. On the other hand, as to the answer to the latter, the number of cases of monitoring comprehension increased as time went on during the year. The more the students developed their English proficiency, the more they would be able to monitor their understanding, although the students seemed to monitor less when working on familiar scripts than when working on unfamiliar scripts.

As for the limitation, there seems to be the effect of this succession of think-aloud interviews. These interviews were conducted five times through the school year. Every time the students were interviewed, they had to pay attention to the materials, retain contents, in order to speak aloud what they did or thought while listening. Monitoring might have been triggered by the author's effort to collect protocols, and it could facilitate the students' success in retention.

If that is indeed the case, then there may be a case for saying that it has its positive side. What is necessary for listening comprehension in the English classroom is a task which draws attention from students and makes them retain what they listened to. The pedagogical implication, then, may be that cognitive activities, such as the protocol collection conducted for this study, may be utilized for improv-

ing learners' listening comprehension.

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**<Appendix>** Scripts for the materials; from "TOEIC Bridge Official Preparation Guide edited by the Institute for International Business Communication"

	Yuki	Anna
1 June	<p>&lt;Air Port&gt; May I have your attention, please. Flight 100 to Toronto is now ready to board. Passengers should report to gate 31 immediately.</p>	<p>&lt;Dry Cleaners&gt; M: I'm going to the dry cleaners W: Could you pick up my jacket? M: No problem. I'll be back soon.</p>
2 July	<p>&lt;Pictures&gt; W: When will our vacation pictures be ready? M: In about an hour. W: While we are waiting, let's go and get something to eat.</p>	<p>&lt;Weather Forecast&gt; We are off to start cold today with sunny sky. It could warm up a little this afternoon. Take that sweater along with you just in case.</p>
3-1 October	<p>&lt;Catch a Bus&gt; M: Excuse me. Could you tell me where I can catch a bus? W: Walk up Fifth Avenue to Main Street, and you'll see a bus stop on the right. M: On the right? Thank you.</p>	
3-2 October	<p>&lt;Dripmaster Two&gt; For the best-tasting coffee, try the new Dripmaster Two. This improved model gets even more flavor from your coffee. Dripmaster Two-buy one today!</p>	
4-1 November	<p>&lt;Mrs. Maison&gt; I'm Mrs. Maison. Welcome to introduction to French. This class meets from 10 to 11:15. Now let's start by opening our textbooks.</p>	
4-2 November	<p>&lt;Cousin&gt; M: My cousin Susan is flying in for visit. She'll get here on Monday. W: That's great news. How long can she stay? M: Just until Saturday.</p>	
5-1 February	<p>&lt;Dry Cleaners&gt; M: I'm going to the dry cleaners W: Could you pick up my jacket? M: No problem. I'll be back soon.</p>	
5-2 February	<p>&lt;Air Port&gt; May I have your attention, please. Flight 100 to Toronto is now ready to board. Passengers should report to gate 31 immediately.</p>	